

## Maupin's fifth does Wimminwood

*A mythical women's music festival in the California redwoods sets the stage for a satirical romp with DeDe and D'orothea in Armistead Maupin's first "lesbian novel."*

BY DELL RICHARDS

**"S**ignificant Others" is Armistead Maupin's fifth novel in the "Tales of the City" series. And, it is his first lesbian novel.

"I'm proud of having written what I consider to be a lesbian novel," he said in a recent interview.

Maupin immerses himself in each character, showing compassion and understanding no matter what the sexual persuasion or political bent. But in "Others," the female point of view is paramount.

The book centers on women characters — lesbians DeDe Halcyon, D'orothea Wilson and bull-dyke Mabel — as well as Wren Douglas, a heterosexual fat queen on a book-pushing tour.

Their hilarious and politically incorrect adventures at Wimminwood — the mythical women's music festival in the California redwoods — ties them all together. And when you throw in the male, chauvinistic pig viewpoint epitomized by Bohemian Club member, Booter Manigault, you have an explosive situation that plays off stereotypes and fears.

Since 1976 when "Tales" first appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Maupin's love of complicated plots has grown. In the latest, the sub-plots are so disparate,

you wonder how these looney-tunes will ever be tied into one sprawling but believable tangle by the end. Yet that is exactly what Maupin does.

His books are still marked by pointed satire, but he writes with an eye to a more-complicated format today. He spends more time developing character now than he did in the first novels; he also lays the groundwork for plot twists sooner than he once did. As a result, intricacies are woven into even tighter corkscrews than they were in the past.

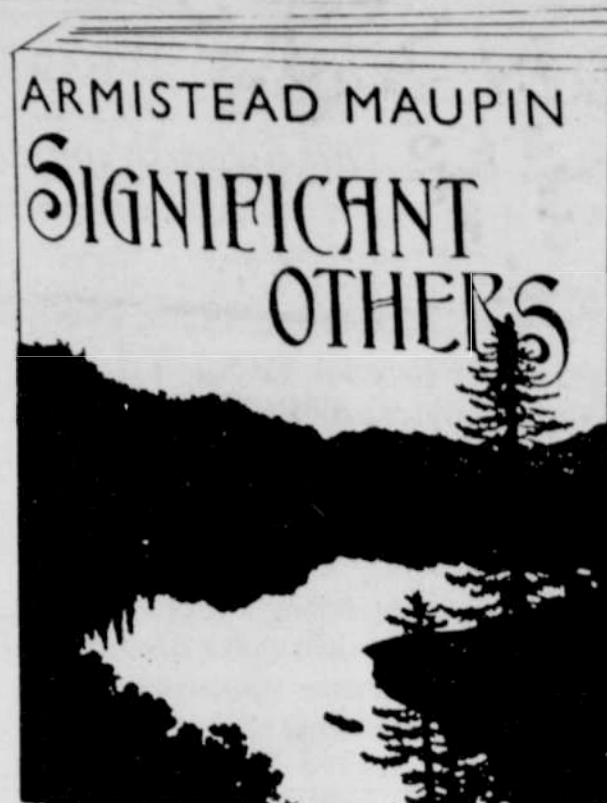
The books are published in the paper, then rewritten — often to add bawdy humor that wouldn't pass the test of a "family newspaper."

In fact, he writes the newspaper version with a group of "white, male editors over 50" going through the column with a fine-toothed comb. Even with that damper, he manages to write the truth as he sees it.

From the beginning, Maupin wanted to write fiction that would encompass the whole of life, gay and straight.

"Most gay fiction made me downright claustrophobic," he said. "It was so intensely gay, so involved with the life of the ghetto. It didn't show life at large.

"I revel in my straight friends," he said. "It makes me feel more alive to function in the world with their blessing."



If there is a secret to the series, it is that the novels treat all relationships in a matter-of-fact light.

This openness is the reason "Tales" has been bought by various producers over the years. But none have been able to live up to Maupin's exacting standards yet.

"It's been optioned off and on by everyone in Hollywood," Maupin said with an ironic laugh. "Sand Dollar Productions — which is Dolly Parton's company — has it right now. She's a great woman who has her head screwed on right, with obviously lots of gay and lesbian friends.

They're talking about a weekly series but "then," he continued, "I think about

what they could do with it. I had a firm offer from Warner Bros. last year. But after talking to them, it became very clear that they were going to take out all the gay characters or reduce them to walk-on curiosities."

Although he would like to see his characters on the silver screen, Maupin is not about to let that happen if the video version isn't true to the series.

"I know why people like the books," he said, "and if they're not willing to do it that way, I'll only get burnt.

"As a matter of fact, it would probably stop my career," he continued. "If it had a bad series, I would spend the rest of my life explaining that I wrote the book, not the series."

As such, Maupin is content to write novels and let the TV series wait for a more liberal time.

"I don't have to compromise as a writer," he said. "I can speak the truth exactly as I see it."

Honesty in his writing is one reason Maupin's books sell as well as they do. He is one of the most refreshing gay writers working today — and one of the few willing to tackle the issues and problems gay people face. In his books, the characters deal not just with love, romance and coming out but with warring sides of themselves — the uptight ex-aristocrat who has become a political activist, the poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks who wants to make it big in the city.

We may not see "Tales" on TV soon, but as long as Maupin's characters remain true to themselves — and their very human foibles — we will all be better for it. •

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